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FILE ONLY

Secrets

CIA Director Casey publicizes the problem of intelligence leaks

If the charges against NBC prove valid, the television network has gravely jeopardized the security of the United States and violated the responsibility that American media must observe.

But if Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey is simply trying to prove a point by harassing a news outlet that reported information already public knowledge, then the government had better stop blaming the media and continue to sharpen its internal-security measures.

Mr. Casey is seeking charges against NBC for revealing intelligence information. He intends to prosecute news agencies that reveal such information. His effort is part of the administration's attempt to plug leaks in government. Previously, he had threatened prosecution of other news organizations for reporting on U.S. intelligence operations regarding Libya.

But the most efficient way to contain a leak is at the source; trying to mop up later simply spreads the trouble, as this case shows.

NBC reported information about a "secret" project with the code name "Ivy Bells," under which U.S. submarines supposedly eavesdrop in Soviet waters. NBC did so once, in a morning newscast. During its evening show, it avoided specific mention of the project, but referred to Mr. Casey's threatened charges.

That action suggests that NBC had second thoughts, whether because of Mr. Casey or because of a belated sense of responsibility is hard to determine. If the latter, NBC was too late. The damage was done.

The fact is, however, that reports on the supposed project appeared in at least two major news publications slightly more than a decade ago. Where was the governmental fury then?

Government secrets are necessarily going to be part of the trial of Ronald W. Pelton, former employee of the National Security Agency, who is accused of selling information to the Soviets. His case prompted the NBC report. Keeping some testimony secret, as prosecutors are attempting, will be a major task.

Although he qualified his accusation against NBC by adding an "if true" to the network's report, Mr. Casey gave a validity to the report that he obviously wanted to avoid. It may have been impossible to do otherwise. Even without his accusation, the report would have been publicized, though perhaps not as dramatically.

The government has been trying to stop leaks at the source by firing those found guilty within its ranks, but it needs to be sterner and quicker. At the same, the irresponsible among the media need to be reminded that our country's safety comes before a news beat. Always.